

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
NEWS ANALYSIS NO. 1-1844
CHARLES MEDD

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"HANDS THAT ONCE PICKED COTTON..."

ANNCR:

THERE IS SUBSTANTIAL AGREEMENT AMONG POLITICAL EXPERTS THAT THE HEAVY TURNOUT OF SOUTHERN BLACK VOTERS WAS A KEY FACTOR IN JIMMY CARTER'S ELECTION VICTORY. CHARLES MEDD HAS THIS COMMENT. VOICE:

DURING THE RACIALLY-TROUBLED DAYS OF THE NINETEEN SIXTIES, SIGNS APPEARED ACROSS THE AMERICAN SOUTH EXHORTING BLACK PEOPLE TO TAKE PART IN THE ELECTION PROCESS. AMONG THEM WAS ONE THAT READ: "HANDS THAT ONCE PICKED COTTON NOW CAN PICK A PRESIDENT." AND THERE ARE THOSE IN THE SOUTH TODAY WHO BELIEVE THAT SUCH HANDS HAVE DONE JUST THAT.

THE EVIDENCE IS PRETTY CONVINCING. JIMMY CARTER CARRIED TEN OF THE ELEVEN STATES THAT ONCE MADE UP THE SOUTHERN CONFEDERACY, FOR A TOTAL OF ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEEN ELECTORAL VOTES THAT WERE VITAL TO HIS ELECTION VICTORY. ANALYSIS OF THE REGIONAL VOTING PATTERNS SHOWS THAT SOUTHERN WHITES PREFERRED PRESIDENT FORD BY A FIFTY-FIVE TO FORTY-FIVE PER CENT MARGIN. BUT WHITE SUPPORT WAS ERASED BY AN OUTPOURING OF SOME FOUR MILLION BLACK VOTES CAST FOR DEMOCRAT CARTER BY A BETTER THAN NINETEEN-TO-ONE RATIO.

THAT BLACKS SHOULD SIDE WITH A SOUTHERN WHITE POLITICIAN IS AN IRONIC COMMENT ON THE TIMES; THAT THEY SHOULD VOTE IN SUCH OVERWHELMING NUMBERS IS A CLEAR TRIBUTE TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. FOR MUCH OF THE FIRST CENTURY AFTER THE CIVIL WAR, BLACK POLITICAL POWER IN THE SOUTH WAS NEGLIGIBLE. BLACKS WHO TRIED TO VOTE WERE SYSTEMATICALLY DISCOURAGED BY A SERIES OF

DISCRIMINATORY RULES, AND THOSE WHO PERSISTED WERE OFTEN MET WITH PHYSICAL RESISTANCE.

THE TURNING POINT CAME IN NINETEEN SIXTY-FIVE WHEN MARTIN LUTHER KING JUNIOR DRAMATIZED THE ISSUE WITH HIS LONG MARCH FROM SELMA, ALABAMA TO THE STATE CAPITAL IN MONTGOMERY. THE MUCH-PUBLICIZED DEMONSTRATION, PUNCTUATED BY BURSTS OF WHITE VIOLENCE, BROUGHT AN IMMEDIATE RESPONSE FROM WASHINGTON WHERE PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON CALLED ON CONGRESS FOR REMEDIAL LEGISLATION. THE RESULT: PASSAGE OF THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT THAT EFFECTIVELY STRIPPED THE SOUTHERN BALLOT BOX OF ITS RACIAL BARRIERS.

DURING HIS LONG, TWO-YEAR QUEST FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY NOMINATION, JIMMY CARTER REPEATEDLY SAID THAT THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT HAD LIBERATED THE ENTIRE SOUTH, WHITES AS WELL AS BLACKS. WITHOUT THE REMOVAL OF THE REGION'S RACIAL STIGMA, NO SOUTHERN POLITICIAN -- HE SAID -- COULD QUALIFY FOR PRESIDENT.

GIVEN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN POLITICS, THAT CARTER COMMENT IS HARD TO QUESTION. HE WAS AFTER ALL THE FIRST MAN FROM THE DEEP SOUTH TO WIN A MAJOR PARTY NOMINATION SINCE BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR. AND HE IS NOW THE NEXT PRESIDENT, PICKED IN NO SMALL PART BY THOSE SAME HANDS THAT ONCE PICKED SOUTHERN COTTON.

MAH/RCS